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Book Review: Heads above Water: Gender, Class, and Family in the Grand Forks Flood

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Heads above Water: Gender, Class, and Family in the Grand Forks Flood. By Alice Fothergill. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. xii + 270 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.50 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Alice Fothergill has performed a great service by reporting about events often overlooked, glossed over, or discounted as fiction that resulted from the 1997 Grand Forks, North Dakota, flood and its impact on local women. Women of all backgrounds, income levels, sexual orientations, and beyond were, and have continued to be, challenged by the events prior to, during, and following the flood.

Fothergill's methodology is carefully detailed, making it readily accessible to readers. The depth and scope of her interviews show the substantial impact (short- as well as long-term) the 1997 flood had on Grand Forks women, their families, and the community. Many of these women experienced the flood as a turning point in their lives. Finding themselves "face-to-face with social and familial upheaval, emotional and physical trauma, and

feelings of loss, vulnerability, and violation," numbers of them, through these experiences, developed a stronger, more positive sense of self and an awareness of the inadequacies of their pre-flood, traditional notions about class, status, and women's roles. Fothergill documents her sources accurately and has clearly checked, double-checked, and triple-checked her information for precision. (As a Grand Forks resident, I can attest to her accuracy and the sureness of her details.) Moreover, she acknowledges that men were also profoundly affected by the 1997 flood, though this is not the focus of her study. And her writing is highly readable and engaging.

The book's only shortcoming, it seems to me, is its thin consideration of Pat Owens, the

then mayor of Grand Forks. Owens epitomized all that the author attempts to bring to this book: she struggled as the first female mayor of Grand Forks, she had been a secretary to several previous mayors, she too wrestled with many family issues during the flood, and she characterized many of the same qualities of Great Plains women so elegantly detailed by Fothergill. This is a minor matter, however, in this excellent, accurate, and accessible account of one of the worst natural disasters in North Dakota history and its continuing impact.

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